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Article (Published Version)

Haslanger, Andrea (2019) The speaking and the dead: antislavery poetry's fictions of the person. *The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation*, 60 (4). pp. 419-440. ISSN 0193-5380

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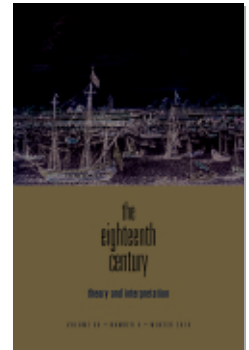
## The Speaking and the Dead: Antislavery Poetry's Fictions of the Person

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The Eighteenth Century, Volume 60, Number 4, Winter 2019, pp. 419-440  
(Article)

Published by University of Pennsylvania Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/ecy.2019.0030>



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# The Speaking and the Dead: Antislavery Poetry's Fictions of the Person

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After the failure of the Abolition Bill in 1791, selected testimony to Parliament on the topic of abolition was published and offered for sale to interested readers. The statistical and anecdotal information contained in *An Abstract of the Evidence Delivered . . . on the Part of the Petitioners for the Abolition of the Slave Trade* overwhelmingly concerns the administration of life and death within the regime of plantation slavery, as detailed by white Britons who traveled to the West Indies and the American colonies in various public and private capacities. Among those called to testify is Ninian Jeffreys, a Master in the Royal Navy, who describes witnessing in Tobago in 1774 the execution of seven enslaved persons who stand accused of “murder[ing] a white man, and destroy[ing] some property on the estate.”<sup>1</sup> Jeffreys offers no details about the circumstances surrounding the purported crimes or about his involvement, if any, in the trial and the sentencing. He is “present . . . at the execution”: he reports that he stands near a man named Chubb as Chubb’s arm is cut off—he does not say by whom. At this point in Jeffreys’s narration, he recalls what Chubb says as he walks to his death. Jeffreys is “standing within two or three yards” when Chubb turns to him and says, “‘Buckra, you see me now, but to-morrow I shall be like that,’ kicking up the dust with his foot.”<sup>2</sup>

Chubb’s remark, which is impossible to authenticate, is clearly shaped by its transmission and by the fact it is reported posthumously by a nonintervening witness. Nevertheless, its force is unmistakable. It frames his execution as a disappearance, a vanishing act, implying that his witness will soon have nothing left to see except dust: it acknowledges colonial law’s reliance on visible spectacles of violence (“you see me now”) but also forestalls or rather collapses the extended duration of such violence, referring only to his future as dust (“to-morrow I shall be like that”).<sup>3</sup> The very thing that figures lifelessness—dusty silence—also figures power, connecting the episode to

actual as well as fictional instances of the enslaved committing suicide: dust cannot be injured and cannot be owned. But the articulation of this point voices a paradox: the enactment of this logic of lifelessness as power, or the removal of life as power, also removes the capacity to speak as a living body and to perform the sort of self-reference of "you see me now." Chubb's remark might be read to suggest that Chubb will be unharmed by anything anyone does once he is dead, or it might be read as presenting death in terms of deliberate muteness. But if from one angle it indicates Chubb's control of what his death can be taken to mean, from another, it indicates the impossibility thereof. Chubb's reported speech indexes a separation between rhetorical existence and biological life that is central to representations of enslavement. It opens onto questions of speaking and dying, of self-representation without self-reference, and of the uncanny convergence between being heard and being dead that are central to antislavery poetry in the closing decades of the eighteenth century. Such questions bear on records like the above, which are comparatively rare, as well as on imaginative depictions and responses to such events, which are the focus of the analysis below.

This essay considers the relation between the end of biological life and the beginning of rhetorical existence in selected antislavery poetry published in Britain in the last three decades of the eighteenth century. It focuses in particular on the conjunction of speaking and dying, examining how the rhetorical figures that facilitate such utterances perform, while they also arrest, the person-making and humanizing processes that have been seen as so central to antislavery poetry.<sup>4</sup> In doing so, it offers an alternate genealogy of antislavery poetry's first-person speakers and suggests that some of these texts evince more skepticism about the very categories on which they appear to depend than they have typically been seen to. The argument that follows places important work about the social and political significance of death in the colonial world in contact with discussions of figure and genre, including the "corpse poem," which "give[s] voice to the voiceless cadaver."<sup>5</sup> It considers how figures of death, speech, and the speaking dead underwrite the representation of the enslaved as poetic speakers in both well- and lesser-known antislavery poetry, and it examines how these texts make a claim on the future precisely through constructing rhetorical structures that outlive death or take death as their origin or occasion. Its intervention is to suggest, first, that first-person renderings of death are both formally and thematically more central to the poetry of antislavery than they have previously been seen to be, and, second, that the conjunction of speaking and dying offers a way of thinking about rhetorical representations that are not recuperative or attached to ideas of the human or the politico-legal person.<sup>6</sup>

In the two decades between the *Somerset v. Stewart* decision (1772) and the defeat of William Wilberforce's motions for immediate abolition in April 1791

and again in April 1792, the depiction and meaning of death remained a contested crux of pro- and antislavery debates.<sup>7</sup> Such debates concerned the comparative prevalence of death among the enslaved, the extent to which planters were responsible for these deaths, and the moral as well as economic significance of Britain's involvement in the enslavement of human persons not legally recognized as such. Death was used as evidence, as a tool of argument, and as a symbol: struggles over its meaning appear in Parliamentary proceedings and in many antislavery sermons, periodicals, pamphlets, and poems that circulated throughout the Atlantic world, as well as in colonial law and in reports of slave suicide.<sup>8</sup> These narratives aimed not only to communicate information about death but also to shape public responses to it. Because many of these discussions occurred far from colonial and naval sites of death, they offered a distant and *de facto* selective account, even as they drew on witnesses' statements and other forms of evidence.<sup>9</sup>

The question of how to transmit information about enslavement and death to members of the public in Britain and North America was hardly a simple one, and one of the central challenges the Abolition Committee and other antislavery campaigners faced was how to make present and proximate realities that were distant. Antislavery poetry offered a highly mediated representation of enslavement and various arguments against it, and yet also attempted to present itself as unmediated, a vehicle for feeling that would be certain to make its case.<sup>10</sup> To do so, it often depicted enslaved persons as first-person speakers, whose utterance was meant to authorize the poems' claims and to evoke experiences at once individual and collective. A subset of these poems imagined the remarks of dying or dead speakers. These first-person voices—living, dying, dead—are instances of *prosopopoeia*, the figure that represents the speech of "an imaginary, absent, or dead person."<sup>11</sup> *Prosopopoeia* is a voice-giving but not necessarily a life-giving or legal-person-making figure, and it differs from personification in that it does not attribute human shape or form where it did not previously exist.<sup>12</sup> Though many readings of these poems discuss them in terms of personification, the two figures are distinct. The question that applies here, and that underlies many existing accounts of antislavery poetry, is how figure operates and what it is seen to secure.<sup>13</sup> What are the consequences, in other words, of generating a voice that speaks for someone else and yet uses the first person to do so, especially when it makes reference to injury suffered by an imaginary, absent, or dead body?<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, given that the figure in question, *prosopopoeia*, is powerfully associated with legal oratory as well as poetic and dramatic technique during the period, what connection, if any, exists between poetic and legal uses of the figure? Scholarship on antislavery poetry and sentiment has suggested that figure operates to animate and confer humanity, raising as well as attempting to redress the problem of the perceived inhumanity of the enslaved, albeit in limited and often paradoxical fashion. It is the argument of this essay, however, that poetic figure can also hold voice

apart from body and life, and from the legal category of personhood, in ways that resist these reparative moves and that associate speech with unmaking rather than making, death rather than life.

In its classical as well as eighteenth-century uses, prosopopoeia is not a purely literary figure: it is associated with law as well as drama and poetry.<sup>15</sup> It refers to a rhetorical technique in which the speaker takes on the voice of another: this can happen in a legal case, when an advocate speaks as the client, or in a play or a poem.<sup>16</sup> Prosopopoeia derives from the Greek word *prosopon*, meaning face or mask, and describes the process by which the *prosopon* is made to speak. The *prosopon* can be human or nonhuman, real or imagined, animate or inanimate: prosopopoeia can give voice to imagined persons, cities, and the dead, as well as to living humans. In one of the period's frequently cited examples, taken from Quintilian, Cicero speaks as the city to berate Catiline. In doing so, Cicero not only produces a voice for the city, but also makes the city a rhetorical person. Eighteenth-century rhetorics commonly describe prosopopoeia as "the fiction of a person."<sup>17</sup> Here, the term "fiction" is not limited to imaginative literature, but refers to the representation of a speaker other than oneself, particularly when linked to emotional intensity or persuasion. Ephraim Chambers notes that poets make "frequent use" of the figure "in their fictions," and orators use it "in their painting of violent passions, which seem to transport, and make them forget themselves."<sup>18</sup> A public speaking manual from 1797, intended for the use of barristers in particular, advises that speakers obviously change their tone when employing the figure: "You ought, in this figure, to change your voice, so that it may immediately appear as if it were not you speaking for *yourself*, but for *another person* introduced in the course of your speech."<sup>19</sup>

In thinking about how prosopopoeia represents rhetorical persons, it matters, of course, who or what is being spoken for. The figure can accompany literal muteness or structural or statutory muteness or no muteness at all. Clearly, it differs according to the specifics of its use: speaking for the living as opposed to the dead or the inanimate involves different configurations of authority and different potential consequences. Nevertheless, all forms of prosopopoeia involve a certain doubling, inasmuch as they generate a claim that refers to but is not authored by the person or position to which it refers. In many of its legal applications, prosopopoeia entails a claim concerning responsibility towards the *prosopon* or wrong done to it. In such instances, the "fiction of a person" can but does not necessarily coincide with a living human being; likewise, it can but does not necessarily coincide with a legal person. The "fiction of a person" makes the being or entity in question recognizable and can grant it social or political existence that it otherwise lacks. In the example from Cicero, the city "after a manner silently speaks" to express the way in which it has been wronged: "Your former actions, though they ought not to have been

borne, yet I did bear as well as I could; but now that I should be wholly occupied with fear of you alone . . . this is no longer endurable."<sup>20</sup> The prosopopoeia of the city expresses its injury and gives voice to its interests, using the first person to make it appear that it is speaking for itself. But if prosopopoeia has the power to make claims about injury or harm heard, it nevertheless depends on borrowed authority: the orator's authority flows through the *prosopon*, which becomes audible through this process. The city cannot speak without Cicero voicing it, and yet the figure strives to naturalize the city's speech as an expression of what the city would say if it could. Prosopopoeia invokes as well as disrupts the self-reference that is typically understood to characterize first-person speech. In cases where prosopopoeia makes claims about injury or harm to a sensate body, this slipperiness around self-reference becomes particularly fraught, because prosopopoeia's claims float free of actual injury even while appearing to link together speech and body in a relation of self-reference that presents the speaker as having experienced the injury or harm under discussion.

The most familiar and oft-cited *prosopon* in antislavery poetry from the period is the titular "negro" from William Cowper's "The Negro's Complaint" (1788), whose first-person voice is meant to demonstrate the injustice of his treatment.<sup>21</sup> As is well known, the poem offers rhetorical elevation in place of other forms of recognition. A reading of prosopopoeia that proceeds from Cowper will look different, I want to suggest, than a reading of the figure that proceeds from examples in which the speaker is dying or dead, for in these cases there is less liability for the rhetorical person to blend into the legal person, the living being, or the human. Fifteen years before Cowper's poem "traveled almost over the whole island" in 1788,<sup>22</sup> Thomas Day and John Bicknell's *The Dying Negro* offered a different paradigm of prosopopoeia, one which also claims wrong done to the *prosopon*, but which projects an earth-bound future that the speaker will be absent from, in the process reminding the reader that the figure's life-giving potential is a fiction. Along with the other poems discussed below, *The Dying Negro* offers a new way of thinking about the use of figure in antislavery poetry, one not exhausted by the dynamics of sentiment and its extension of humanity, but instead defined by a deliberate suspension of such processes. *The Dying Negro* inaugurates what we might call a new kind of mortuary poetics within British antislavery poetry. By this I mean a poetics that not only concerns death but that understands it as the organizing principle, both formally and thematically, of its figuration of speech. This representation of the speaking and the dead, or the speaking as the dead, is developed further in poems of the 1790s, discussed below, and it leads me to my discussion of the "corpse poem" as a way of theorizing this strand of antislavery poetry.

*The Dying Negro*, first published in 1773 and revised and expanded in second and third editions (1774; 1775), is an influential and much-imitated poem

that comprises the last words of its titular speaker. It has clear affinities not only with the heroic exceptionality of Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko: or The Royal Slave* (1688) and Thomas Southerne's *Oroonoko: A Tragedy* (1695) but also with the representative singularity of later antislavery poems spoken by "the" "negro" or "African" or "slave." The poem's subtitle—*A Poetical Epistle, Supposed to be Written by a Black (Who lately shot himself on board a vessel in the river Thames;) to his intended Wife*—sketches the surrounding circumstances, taken from newspaper reports on which the poem is loosely based.<sup>23</sup> The speaker's intended wife is a white servant he has been prevented from marrying, despite having been recently baptized; the poem's setting is a ship in the Thames the speaker has been forced aboard, in defiance of the Somerset ruling of the previous year.<sup>24</sup> Though the first edition of the poem presents itself as a document "supposed to be written," it clearly draws on oratorical technique: the dying speaker addresses his beloved, his master, the gods of Africa, and the Christian God in registers ranging from the sentimental to the polemical to the vengeful. The ongoing nature of the speaker's dying can be read along at least three different lines: first, it amplifies the poem's emotional appeal to readers; second, it allows the speaker to express his wishes about how he will be memorialized; and third, it represents states of living and dying as overlapping and mutually implicated, which is essential to the poem's depiction of death's meaning.

The techniques used to represent death in *The Dying Negro* employ as well as resist prevalent poetic modes of making death mean, including the sentimental and the elegiac. As the poem develops its response to the speaker's impending death, it initially introduces familiar coordinates of departure and mourning (the beloved "bedew[ing]" the grave, the enumeration of all that the speaker will miss), but then goes on to qualify them, turning away from what it dismisses as the quietism of traditional modes of memorialization.<sup>25</sup> Perhaps the strongest example of this appears when the poem apostrophizes the natural world that the deceased will no longer witness: "Ye waving groves . . . / Ye meads now glitt'ring with the morning dew! / Ye flowers . . . / . . . shall fade no more."<sup>26</sup> The poem appears to become elegiac here, but it introduces elegy only to disavow it: the flowers bloom on "yonder hated shore," and they fade at the speaker's "baneful step."<sup>27</sup> Instead of the natural world conspiring to mourn the departed, the flowers shrink from the speaker, and he refuses their future use as memorials to him: "I ask no vernal bloom— / No pageant wreaths to wither on my tomb. / —Let serpents hiss and night-shade blacken there, / To mark the friendless victim of despair."<sup>28</sup> The reference to "my tomb," which forcefully claims it as the speaker's, is a revision of the first edition's "No pageant wreaths to deck an outcast's tomb" and intensifies the claim to ownership internal to the poem.<sup>29</sup> The hissing serpents and the night-shade "mark[ing]" the speaker's grave reject elegiac or epitaphic consolation



and instead threaten visitors with death, expressing a desire to be able to posthumously hurt others.

The event of the speaker's death, which happens beyond the bounds of the poem, is to some extent "suspend[ed]" by the speaker's position as dying.<sup>30</sup> This allows the speaker to be strongly associated with the dead, even though he has yet to die, which in turn prompts scrutiny of what it means to be dying, whether quickly or slowly, voluntarily or not. In place of the familiar elegiac and epitaphic reminder of how death comes to everyone, the poem offers a different take on the idea that in the midst of life we are in death. It does so by associating enslaved life with a state of dying, which is to say waiting to die or, in the speaker's case, electing self-murder. In part, this is a comment on slavery and social death, but it is also a challenge to divisions between the living and the dead as they are drawn elsewhere. The poem develops its polemical edge as it modulates the meaning and significance of death within the framework of determinism and self-determination. It uses death to describe the condition of slavery (the speaker becomes a "carcase" when sold) and suicide as the last weapon to use against it (the speaker is "Arm'd . . . with the power to die").<sup>31</sup> In presenting the grave in which the body rots as preferable to the grave of the slave ship (the "hecatomb," as Day calls it in the preface), the poem uses self-murder to raise the specter of slavery as mass murder:

And better in th' untimely grave to rot,  
 The world and all its cruelties forgot,  
 Than dragg'd once more beyond the Western main,  
 To groan beneath some dastard planter's chain,  
 Where my poor countrymen in bondage wait,  
 The long enfranchisement of ling'ring fate.  
 . . .  
 A slow-consuming death let others wait,  
 I snatch destruction from unwilling fate.<sup>32</sup>

Suicide defies the planter's will (or in this case, the Captain's) because it refuses coerced labor by turning the living body into a corpse. It puts an end to forced survival and the violent extraction of capacity, and it delivers the "enfranchisement" of death, "for not beyond the grave, / Thy power extends, nor is my dust thy slave."<sup>33</sup> The master who "forbade me Nature's common rights to claim" cannot deprive the speaker of rights once he is dust, but neither can dust experience deprivation, or indeed claim rights in the same way a living person can.<sup>34</sup> Nor, for that matter, can dust speak without the help of fictions and figures. The speaker's self-extinction exempts him from being "dragg'd once more" into enslavement, but it does so by exempting him from having any sort of experience in the future. It is importantly distinct from the deaths of white Britons imagined in the poem (those of the ship's crew and

those caused by a widespread revolt, when “Eternal justice wakes” and “African triumphs”), which deliver punishment where it is due. The speaker’s death, by contrast, “snatch[es]” death from “unwilling fate,” transforming a life of slow death into the immediate “enfranchisement” of choosing to become a corpse.<sup>35</sup>

In *The Dying Negro*, prosopopoeia is not concerned with giving life, but instead with giving voice to death. Along with the other antislavery poems I discuss below, it moves towards an association of the poetic speaker with a corpse. Here, Diana Fuss’s query about “why, and when . . . a dead voice [is] more appropriate than a live one” is particularly relevant.<sup>36</sup> Recognizing that dead and dying speakers are essential to antislavery poetry’s ventriloquism invites a new account of figure in antislavery poetry. This new account does not associate figure with life-giving or humanizing powers, but instead with the suspension or the stepping to the side of such processes. My argument about this alternative genealogy of figure in antislavery poetry complements, but does not overwrite, existing arguments about figure in antislavery poetry, which overwhelmingly approach it via the sentimental. Such accounts ask what is at issue when a poem claims to demonstrate humanity and seems to assume that a rhetorical figure can ontically elevate—and needs to ontically elevate—an enslaved person. Mary Loeffelholz states the worry clearly:

In terms particularly of the rhetoric of abolitionist sentimental poetry, the problem is the writing over of animate persons in order to make the inanimate object that the poem only then rhetorically endows with life and personhood. Sentimental writing, in Philip Fisher’s influential formulation, “experiments with the extension of full and complete humanity to classes of figures from whom it has been socially withheld,” thus generating “novel *objects* of feeling” for sentimental readers.<sup>37</sup>

The problem with the sentimental, in other words, is that it first must make into an object the very entity it wants to turn into a subject. When the entity in question is a human, rather than a snuffbox or a starling, this means removing the very quality (humanity) that is to be restored. Loeffelholz continues, “To the extent that it depends on personification for its agents, and on prolepsis and metalepsis for its actions, sentimental poetry perhaps even more than sentimental fiction thus foregrounds the problem of the *figure’s* role in extending the effects of ‘complete humanity’ to the objects it proffers to benevolent readers.”<sup>38</sup> The catch with using figure to extend complete humanity is, of course, that humanity is then just a figure, or the effect of a figure. As Lynn Festa remarks, “the provisional lending of human traits and voice to the slave creates the *effect* of humanization without any necessary real transformation.”<sup>39</sup> Seen in this way, figure in antislavery poetry is a conservative device, one that has the potential to maintain the privations it claims to address. And this reading

of figure certainly applies to many antislavery poems which celebrate the piety of their readers while instrumentalizing the enslaved, offering up set pieces of suffering that can be consumed and set to the side, having performed the function of making the reader feel, but not too much.<sup>40</sup>

In the late 1780s and early 1790s, the continued influence of Day and Bicknell's work is evident in poems with similar titles that retain the strategy of representing the enslaved speaking from near or even beyond the grave. These include Frank Sayers's "The Dying African" (ca. 1789–90); another anonymous poem of the same title published in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, signed S. S. (1791); John Collins's "The Desponding Negro" (ca. 1792); and an anonymous, untitled poem, which begins "On his downy pillow lying," also published in the *Gentleman's Magazine* (1792).<sup>41</sup> I will discuss Sayers's and Collins's poems—both of which were also performed as ballads—before turning to the two anonymous ones. Both Sayers's "The Dying African" and Collins's "The Desponding Negro" describe the plight of an African sold into slavery who yearns to die or is about to die. Sayers's poem catalogs the speaker's physical suffering and his infirmities, ending each stanza with the refrain, "For the strong arm of death is the arm of a friend."<sup>42</sup> Whereas it stages the speaker's death—"Slow, slow beats my heart, and I hasten to rest"—"The Desponding Negro" narrates the speaker's escape from death, which he bitterly rues.<sup>43</sup> Each poem employs metrical emphasis to heighten its description of forced survival and regulated temporality, associating such regularity with physical as well as psychological suffering and with the desire to be released from it. This has the effect of placing the speaker's voice in the context of determining constraints rather than making it appear wholly self-determined.

In "The Dying African," verse structures and gives expression to a tension between the physiological rhythms that keep the body alive, on the one hand, and the imposition of physical conditions and demands that are inimical to survival, on the other. We might think of these as two different sorts of involuntary rhythms, which the meter displays as continuing and regular: the slowing, yet still steady heartbeat ("Slow, slow beats my heart"), and the repeated brutalities the speaker will no longer experience once he has died: "No more shall I sink in the deep-scorching air, / No more shall sharp hunger my weak body tear, / No more on my limbs shall keen lashes descend / For the strong arm of death is the arm of a friend."<sup>44</sup> In the anaphoric "no more" and more strongly in the later "Now, now shall I 'scape—every torture will end," the poem expresses pulses of will in the wish to die.<sup>45</sup> But these expressions of will do not in any way diminish the strong association of repetition and metrical regularity with subjection in the poem, whether to overwork and arbitrary punishment or to continued survival. "The Dying African" does not simply communicate suicidal despair, but instead suggests that the continuance of life in a condition of enslavement is undesirable precisely because life becomes

and enables the subjection that the poem metrically evokes. It also seems possible that the poem might not raise consciousness so much as subdue it, precisely because of its repetition, regularity, and refrain. Max Cavitch describes the metrics of the poetry of slavery "as a history of subjectivation through rhythm," and asks whether such verse has "a structuring attachment to subjection": to what extent do metrical conventions expose the regulated time of labor and to what extent do they reproduce it?<sup>46</sup> In the case of "The Dying African," it is not simply metrical regularity but also the presentation of death as a friend and the disappearance of any responsible parties or agents (the lash descends without any mention of a hand, or indeed a willing agent, directing it) that makes the poem liable to smooth over the very claims that it might seem so urgently to raise.

Antislavery verse also uses meter to present enforced survival as a form of unfreedom that etiolates life; here, being fated to live is more unlucky than being fated to die. The emphatic verse of "The Desponding Negro" communicates the physical and psychological urgency of the speaker's desire to escape captivity (associated not only with enslavement but also with free existence in Britain), while also giving form to economic determinants of the speaker's survival, both as a captive on board a slave ship and a blind beggar, "wand'r'ing for Bread now."<sup>47</sup> The speaker's struggle to collect money provides the poem's refrain: "Spare a Halfpenny—spare a Halfpenny— / Spare a Halfpenny to a poor Negro."<sup>48</sup> But this statement of scarcity exists alongside two parallel trajectories of prodigious accumulation: first, the speaker's series of injuries, and second, the enrichment of the captain who acts only according to the "Prospect . . . of Gain."<sup>49</sup> These two trajectories are placed almost immediately at odds when the speaker reaches the deck during a storm, only to be struck by lightning: "I all wildly despairing / Burst my Chains, rush'd on Deck, with mine Eye-balls wide glaring, / When the Lightning's dread Blast struck the Inlets of Day, / And its glorious bright Beams shut for ever away."<sup>50</sup> As the speaker narrates being struck blind by lightning, his injury—his loss of sight—is immediately subordinated to the captain's financial loss, which spurs his decision to murder the speaker: "The Despoiler of Man, then, his Prospect thus losing, / Of Gain by my Sale, not a blind Bargain choosing, / As my Value, compar'd with my Keeping, was light, / Had me dash'd overboard, in the Dead of the Night."<sup>51</sup> The speaker lives to tell the tale of this attempted murder because he is rescued by a ship bound for Britain. However, he describes his rescue as a further loss, a robbery made possible by the very moonlight he cannot see: "But by Moonlight descry'd, I was snatched from the wave, / And reluctantly robb'd of a watery grave."<sup>52</sup> The representation of rescue as theft highlights how the experience of forced survival (and attempted murder) will only be resolved in the hereafter, "when the Judge and the Ponderer, / Shall restore Light and Rest to the Blind and the Wanderer."<sup>53</sup>

These two poems' repetitive and cumulative form extends to their repetition

in performance. Because they must be repeated, they must offer up the biography they contain more or less endlessly. To repeat the poem is to replay indefinitely the sequence of dying, or of attempted murder and rescue, but more than that, to make the speaker a technology of repetition. This overlays the act of speaking or singing with a tale that circles back on itself, again and again. Though the 1790s substantially predate recording technology, the poem's multiplication in performance as well as its dissemination in print endlessly reanimates the climactic events of its narrative. The suggestion that the speaker is forced to repeat the song again and again raises questions about the machinic aspects of antislavery poetry's ventriloquism. Is the reproductive technology here not the speaker but instead the poetic genre itself? If poetic fictions such as this one make a claim to authenticity based on injury and ask the reader or listener to stand toward the poem as if it is real, as if it derives from an original that is true, then the repetition of such poetic fictions both depends on the idea of an original and endlessly multiplies it. This is precisely the logic expressed by titles that name *the* dying, desponding, complaining "Negro" or "African." Though clearly there is a sense in which the repetition of the poem can be seen as an amplification of its claims, a broadcasting ever more loudly of the harm it describes, there is the further question of who can justly represent the dying and the dead, and how such justness is determined.

The presence of dying or rescued speakers in antislavery poetry would appear to place death in the future, so that dying is never fully complete and is endlessly reiterable. But in fact death is a relation to the present as well as to the future in these poems. The corpse and the grave describe states of life and states of death in *The Dying Negro* and "The Desponding Negro." To be a corpse while alive is at once proleptic (it is what you will become) and descriptive (it captures an ongoing present of nonautonomy and violent use). The association between speaker and corpse in these poems is used to anticipate death and to associate chattel slavery with death, but because the poems do not describe the moment of the speaker's death, the corpse might best be understood as a limit state that the poem approaches but never reaches. But in at least two cases, antislavery poetry does depict the moment of death. This occurs in "The Dying African," signed S. S., and in the anonymous, untitled poem mentioned above. "The Dying African" follows the conceit of Day and Bicknell in representing the speaker's dying words, and of Sayers in attempting somatic realism with a slowing pulse and dimming eyes. It includes many familiar features of antislavery poetry: the speaker's separation from his family, his suicidal wish to have leapt to his death at sea, his present experience of torture and coerced labor, the continuation of which is expressed through anaphora. Like Day and Bicknell's poem, it expresses a dying wish to be heard, imagining a ghostly groan as the continuation of the speaker's demands. The sequence unfolds as follows, addressing Britons who consume goods produced by slave labor:

Mid hours of frolick hear this feeble moan  
 Let my shrunk ghost arise, and startle at my groan.  
 Oh, if among the guardians of your laws,  
 Some nobler son of feeling pleads our cause,  
 Our constant blessings shall his steps attend  
 First in our prayers shall rise the sufferer's friend.<sup>54</sup>

This passage juxtaposes the dying speaker, whose demand to be heard continues posthumously; the groaning ghost, who communicates without speaking; and the antislavery advocate (doubtless a white Briton), who pleads "our cause." All three voice a condemnation of slavery, but only the "nobler son of feeling" does so as the author of *prosopopoeia* rather than the *prosopon*, the face or mask made to speak. As suggested above, the use of dying speakers in antislavery poetry helps to expose the use of figure to produce speech, and this passage does so explicitly in its implied alignment of the poet and reader with "nobler son[s] of feeling." In light of this, it is notable that the poem's concluding lines attempt to renaturalize *prosopopoeia* as a kind of living utterance only. They do so by representing the end of the speaker's remarks, followed by his death, which another voice narrates. The quotation marks that frame the speaker's address close and: "—He spoke no more! / His quiv'ring lips had lost their wonted pow'r! / His eyes were fix'd! he feebly mov'd his head / His pulse no longer beat! His spirit fled!"<sup>55</sup> Even in a poem that describes ghostly groans, there is a hesitancy to depict the ghost as speaking, which maintains the need for auditors of the groans to translate them into persuasive speech. And yet these closing lines can also be read as commenting on the fact that the poem is no longer making the speaker's lips move or pulse beat.

It appears, then, that death defies first-person narration in antislavery poetry. However, in at least one case, an antislavery poem presents a dead speaker who describes his death—which has already occurred—from a first-person perspective. This occurs in an anonymous, untitled lyric, published in the *Gentleman's Magazine* in March 1792. This poem is among the most exceptional antislavery verse published in Britain in the eighteenth century, and to date has gone unremarked, with one important exception.<sup>56</sup> Like *The Dying Negro*, it claims to be based on a death the author has learned of, but it contains no heroic romance and hardly a trace of sentiment. The poem opens by describing a planter asleep, who is visited by visions of all the enslaved persons he has harmed, including the speaker: "On a sudden, all around him, / Troops of sable ghosts appear'd; / While his conscious fears confound him, / These upbraiding sounds he heard."<sup>57</sup> The poem's opening sequence, set in a dream, frightens the planter and wakes him.<sup>58</sup> These seemingly inarticulate "sounds" become intelligible speech in the following stanzas, as the planter is forced to listen to a series of indictments. The first several are familiar and include the incompatibility of slavery and Christianity and the hypocrisy of

the British commitment to liberty. The address moves fluidly between the first person singular and plural for the first three stanzas, suggesting that the plight of the speaker is shared by many others: "Then, from each relation parted, / Heat, and cold, and toil we bore; / Oft my back with scourging smarted, / And my limbs were stain'd with gore."<sup>59</sup> The speaker's description of his injuries immediately precedes his narration of his suicide. Notice how the "I" erupts at the moment of self-annihilation:

Thus tormented, wild, despairing,  
 Every hour my bosom wrung,  
 T'escape worse torture, blindly daring,  
 O'er the cauldron's verge I sprung.  
 In the boiling sugar sinking,  
 Cruel man! thou didst't me see;  
 But the cup thy slaves are drinking  
 After death awaits for thee.<sup>60</sup>

The speaker's retelling of his own death might make it appear ongoing and incomplete, along the lines of the participial states of dying and desponding mentioned above. But this is not in fact the case: even though the speaker's narration of his death replays it, and the past action of "sprung" comes into contact with the present in its retelling, it is clear that the speaker is dead from the beginning. The poem's entire expression is posthumous: its fiction of a person attaches a voice to a dead body, not a living one. What is remarkable is how the poem stages the production of the speaker's voice by connecting it directly to the moment of his death. As the speaker narrates his own death, he describes his passage from living body to corpse. "The corpse," remarks Jonathan Lamb, "is the antithesis of property" because "it has no person to exchange."<sup>61</sup> The corpse, in other words, has no body that can be valued for its labor, no person in the sense of the person as bearer of rights and duties.

In making a corpse speak, this poem interrupts the bundling together of living body, voice, and rhetorical personhood that characterizes other antislavery poems with enslaved speakers. Whereas the speakers of *The Dying Negro*, "The Dying African," and "The Desponding Negro" are imaginable as still living, even though they are dying, the speaker of this untitled poem is not. The fact that the speaker is already dead is the clear pretense of the poem as well as the topic of its narration. And yet to be dead, here, as I have said, is the condition for speech. It is also, crucially, the condition for sidestepping traditional circuits of sentimental identification and conventional elegiac forms. Several points follow from this. First, this untitled poem exposes figure as the source of rhetorical existence much more clearly than the others: prosopoeia's fiction of a person is much more obviously fictional if it emanates

from a dead body than from a speaker who sounds like a living person speaking for himself. Second, within the poem, death is the condition for speech: not only does the poem separate rhetorical existence from biological existence, but it in fact suggests that they are incompatible in this particular case. Or, to put the point slightly differently, the poem uses one impossibility—the speaking dead—to illuminate another—the speaking slave. By speaking, I mean speaking for oneself and recognized as such.

Part of the reason that this untitled poem is so important, in addition to the fact that it unflinchingly depicts self-murder by commodity that ruins the commodity, is that it clearly holds rhetorical self-representation (which is posthumous) apart from legal or political self-representation. This matters because it arrests any slippage between lyric and politico-legal person.<sup>62</sup> The speaking corpse may be a rhetorical person but it is not a politico-legal person and does not desire to become one: it is beyond the realm of the politico-legal person. There is no danger that one might experience the poem as attempting to shift from one register of the person to the other. This is in sharp contrast to anti-slavery poetry with living speakers, where figure's operation can recede sufficiently to be invisible and can create a powerful but false naturalizing effect of making it seem that the speaker is what Thomas Hobbes would call a natural person, that is, someone who is able to speak for himself and be held responsible for himself.<sup>63</sup> Because the most forceful moments in these poems can come across as autopoiesis, and because these poems include claims about rights (to safety, security, property), they traverse these different realms of the person. But, as discussed above, they cannot effect the transformations they describe: their use of prosopopoeia in particular and figure in general has widely been understood as conservative, precisely because it conserves the very distinctions and exclusions it claims to redress. My point here, in relation to this poem and the tradition of which it is a part, is that figure can also be used radically. I do not mean that figure can literally liberate anyone, but that it can call attention to the impasses and contradictions within discourses of freedom and liberal personhood, it can shatter sentiment, and it can call for revolt. And radical uses of figure can, by virtue of their exceptional nature, make visible conservative ones.

The poem's dead speaker puts mortality to political ends, using his posthumous authority to call for revolt, which is both individual—"I vengeance shall obtain"—and collective—"Negroes want not strength and bravery / When for freedom they've a mind."<sup>64</sup> The continuance of the speaker's voice, in defiance of the convention that the dead do not speak, makes this poem what Fuss terms a "corpse poem," a poem not simply about the dead but spoken by the dead, "a first-person poetic utterance, written in the present or past tense and spoken in the voice of the deceased."<sup>65</sup> Fuss's analysis of the genre focuses on the past two centuries and does not discuss antislavery poetry, but her theory of the corpse poem offers a powerful heuristic for this untitled poem and for



the tradition of antislavery poetry that it develops and extends.<sup>66</sup> Such poems “bring language more fully in line with death . . . [and] seek to revivify and reauthorize the dead”: as such, they sit uneasily alongside the dominant forms of elegy and epitaph that are more interested in speaking about the dead than as the dead.<sup>67</sup> The corpse poem resists the epitaph as monument as well as the idea that memorials to the dead should speak not in the voice of the dead but in “the general language of humanity as connected with the subject of death,” as William Wordsworth describes it in the first of his *Essays on Epitaphs* (1810).<sup>68</sup>

The corpse poem does not invite mourning. Unlike the elegy, it does not offer consolation to those who survive, and unlike the epitaph, it does not associate the stone’s silence with the deceased’s.<sup>69</sup> The corpse poem is in some sense indifferent to grief, or at least more insistently separate from it than the epitaph and the elegy.<sup>70</sup> It places a fiction of voice alongside a fiction of death. It therefore offers a very different mode in which antislavery poetry can explore slavery’s relation to life and death, one that is not elegiac or epitaphic or generally sentimental, but one in which *all* appearances of being a subject are fictions. Here we begin to see an answer to the question of what “the fictional persona of a cadaver allows poets to achieve.”<sup>71</sup> In this poem, a dead speaker is appropriate, even necessary, not only because the dead speaker is irrecoverable via sentiment or other reparative modes, but also because the dead voice speaks about what the living lack. The dead voice articulates the living’s muteness as well as the desire for this to no longer be the case; it acquires political existence not in relation to itself but in relation to others, who might carry out the “vengeance” the speaker prescribes.

The corpse is no longer a sensate body but remembers its existence as one. When it speaks in print, it records a death that would otherwise have been unknown to many and perhaps even unrecorded. In this regard, “figures of speech [in the corpse poem] come to stand in for the missing or forgotten corpses of history.”<sup>72</sup> The prefatory note to “On his downy pillow lying” emphasizes this: it remarks that the poem is based on a real episode in which a slave who has refused to work and has been whipped says that if he is punished again, he will die. As soon as the overseer undertakes to harm him further, he kills himself by jumping into the boiling sugar. The grotesque, ironically posed question that concludes the prefatory note, “Had this slave no feeling?,” implies not only a dullness of physical sensation but also a lack of sympathy toward the “humane good man” who had ordered his punishment.<sup>73</sup> In the prefatory note, having no feeling is associated with familiar racist attitudes used to justify violence. In the poem itself, however, having no feeling takes on a further meaning: it describes being beyond the reach of physical sensation and therefore beyond the reach of physical harm, which is the poem’s condition of possibility. The corpse poem abstracts the speaker from sensation and from life in a way that is not privative. Whereas elegy’s anaphoric reminders of what the dead will no longer experience present the

removal from life and from sensation as the grounds for mourning, voice here outlives the sensate body to express what the sensate body experienced and what it, by virtue of its racialized particularity, was categorically excluded from: the protections of law to guard against such violence and use.

The central significance of the speaking dead to antislavery poetry in the last three decades of the eighteenth century, which is a development that can be traced from *The Dying Negro* through the untitled poem discussed above, indicates an intensification in tone and a turn away from sentiment in the representation of enslavement to the reading public. But it also demonstrates a tendency to employ figure in part to expose figure and to invite readers to reflect on it. As antislavery poetry moves away from the affirmative tones of Cowper to the despairing and at times menacing strains of "The Desponding Negro," "The Dying African," and other poems in the same vein, it develops a mode of representation that is not easily assimilable to the living or the human. The use of prosopopoeia in these poems to show the nonidentity of living and speaking associates figure not with the restoration of the human, but with the suspension of the human, or the falling beyond the human. This has the advantage of allowing for a discussion of these poems that is not governed by humanity and inhumanity or by certain sentimental forms.

In closing, I want to reflect briefly on the relation between rhetorical and politico-legal persons. I have deliberately used the term "rhetorical person" to describe prosopopoeia, but it will be clear that other configurations of the person are pressing in here, not least those that concern legal responsibility and rights and that are denied to enslaved persons under chattel slavery. Both rhetorical personhood and politico-legal personhood encompass representation of oneself (or of another's self), and contemporary definitions of each use speech as the medium of such representation. Such an idea of representation making persons calls to mind Hobbes's influential formulation of the person. "A person," Hobbes writes in *Leviathan* (1651), "is he *whose words or actions are considered, either as his own or as representing the words or actions of another man, or of any other thing, to whom they are attributed, whether truly or by fiction.*"<sup>74</sup> The person, in effect, is a category of representation, of speaking for oneself or for someone or something else: most anyone or anything that can be represented can be a person. Crucially, however, not all persons are able to speak for themselves: not all persons are considered what Hobbes calls authors of their own words and actions. Those who cannot speak for themselves, either because they are not in possession of a voice (like cities or the state) or because their voice is not officially recognized (like children or the enslaved), are only able to become persons when spoken for. Such beings and entities are what Hobbes calls artificial, as opposed to natural, persons. As is well known, not all humans are natural persons, and the mere ability to speak does not necessarily entail natural personhood. The essential point is that what Hobbes calls "personation" (the word he uses for making persons) is akin to prosopopoeia. His

discussion in chapter 16 of *Leviathan* refers to the *prosopon* to describe how *any* personation, whether of oneself or another, is “act[ing] or represent[ing].”<sup>75</sup> Hobbes’s person looks surprisingly similar to the fictions of persons described above, where fiction does not refer to unreality so much as to rhetorical figure and the process of figuration.<sup>76</sup> For Hobbes, persons are called into being through figuration, but the distinction between being able to figure oneself, on the one hand, and needing to be figured by another, on the other hand, is hardly self-evident. It depends on categories of social, political, and legal recognition seen to be pre-existing and yet generated—or at the very least reinforced—by the process of figuration. Figuration, in other words, effects the very separations it is said to reflect.

Hobbes’s account of personhood is concerned not only with representation, but also with rights and responsibility, which is to say with owning one’s own or others’ actions. It is invested in being able to show that its representation is just, and therefore can rightly make claims about what any given person owns (i.e., is responsible for) and is owed. In light of this, the dead present an interesting case: though *prosopopoeia* can represent them as speaking, and therefore as rhetorical persons, they cannot be persons in Hobbes’s sense. The dead are beyond the bounds of the person for Hobbes because they no longer own anything and are no longer owed anything. It seems notable, then, that the poems under discussion here present the dead as speaking by using a rhetorical figure tied to instantiating the person in Hobbes’s philosophy. If *prosopopoeia* can make persons in Hobbes’s sense, it can also represent their unmaking. In representing their unmaking, it can articulate how biological life and speech are held apart not only in poems that ventriloquize the dead, but also in the giving and withholding of personhood more generally. We might see this as opening up a fissure in the category of the person, or as suggesting the need to move beyond the term in discussing antislavery poetry, so as to avoid recurring to reparative and restorative patterns. In either case, these poems refuse figure as resolution in favor of figure as interruption.

## NOTES

I would like to thank Jonathan Lamb and Tom Stern for their thoughtful comments on earlier versions of this essay.

1. *An Abstract of the Evidence Delivered Before a Select Committee of the House of Commons in the Years 1790 and 1791; on the Part of the Petitioners for the Abolition of the Slave Trade* (London, 1791), 77.

2. *An Abstract of the Evidence*, 77.

3. This recalls the concluding scene of Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko* [1688], where Oroonoko’s response to his executioners is its own kind of refusal of their demands. For a discussion of Oroonoko’s body as a spectacle, see Ramesh Mallipeddi, “Spectacle, Spectatorship, and Sympathy in Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko*,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 45, no. 4 (2012): 475–96, and *Spectacular Suffering: Witnessing Slavery in the Eighteenth-Century British Atlantic* (Charlottesville, 2016).

4. The literature on this topic is extensive. See for example Lynn Festa, *Sentimental Figures of Empire in Eighteenth-Century Britain and France* (Baltimore, 2006); Suvir Kaul, *Poems of Nation, Anthems of Empire: English Verse in the Long Eighteenth Century* (Charlottesville, 2000); and Jonathan Lamb, *The Things Things Say* (Princeton, 2011).

5. Diana Fuss theorizes the "corpse poem," discussed at greater length below, in "Corpse Poem," *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 1 (2003): 1–30, 1. See also Fuss, *Dying Modern: A Meditation on Elegy* (Durham, 2013).

6. To be clear, these poems have a direct political aim—abolition—and their rhetorical intensity is in service of this aim. Their authors did not conceive of them as exercises in figure, and their relation to death is by no means simply figural. That it took a further sixteen years to abolish the slave trade, following the defeat of the Abolition Bill in 1791, meant that between a quarter of a million and a million further persons were enslaved. Thanks to one of the anonymous readers of this essay for this observation.

7. In the early hours of 20 April 1791, Wilberforce's motion was defeated in the House of Commons, eighty-eight to one hundred and sixty-three. The following year, a further motion for immediate abolition was debated in the House. Following a suggestion from Henry Dundas, the Secretary of State for Home and Colonial Affairs, the motion was amended to include the word "gradually." The amended motion, proposing gradual rather than immediate abolition, passed by two hundred thirty to eighty-five on 3 April 1792. What was agreed gave no indication of what "gradual" meant and no deadline for implementation. It marked the second defeat of immediate abolition in the space of a year. See William Hague, *William Wilberforce: The Life of the Great Anti-Slave Trade Campaigner* (London, 2007), esp. 234–35.

8. *An Abstract of the Evidence* cites statistics from a number of traders, including Mr. Morley, who "in four voyages . . . purchased 1325 [persons to be sold], and lost about 313" (48). *An Abstract of the Evidence* also notes the prevalence of slave suicide, recording "many instances" of the enslaved refusing to eat and the consensus among several witnesses that enslaved persons, "when brought into the colonies, frequently destroy themselves" (39, 117). By this point, as Vincent Brown has shown, Jamaican planters had already sent two documents to the House of Commons denying their responsibility for the high rates of mortality among enslaved persons, claiming instead "that the decrease in the slave population was due largely to various 'causes not imputable to use, and which the People in Great Britain do not seem to understand'" (*The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery* [Cambridge, 2008], 183).

9. As recent scholarship by Brown and Monique Allewaert has demonstrated, attending to the cultural and political significance of death in Jamaica and the West Indies, particularly as it is manifest in funeral practices and physical resistance among the enslaved, deepens our understanding of regimes of violence and death. Brown argues that death is not inimical to Jamaican culture but in fact integral to it: it is "the ground that produced Atlantic slavery's most meaningful idioms" (59). Allewaert develops an account of the "body in parts" as a form of "anticolonial . . . personhood," which offers an important revision to a politico-legal category that has long been seen to operate based on exclusion (*Ariel's Ecology: Plantations, Personhood, and Colonialism in the American Tropics* [Minneapolis, 2013], 2, 85–103).

10. Antislavery poetry often frames this immediacy in terms of communicative sound, which needs to be heard to be efficacious. The poem, then, helps to transmit and amplify.

11. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "prosopopoeia," n., [www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com). The *OED*'s definition encompasses speech as well as action, but the eighteenth-century understanding of the term attaches more to speech than to action. For more on the history of prosopopoeia, see James J. Paxson, *The Poetics of Personification* (Cambridge, 1994).

12. I follow Paxson and Michael Riffaterre, among others, in insisting that prosopopoeia is not the same thing as personification and is distinguished by its use of speech.

Though prosopopoeia appears as a species of personification in at least one eighteenth-century account (Hugh Blair's), it is treated as distinct in the rhetorics and sources under discussion here, and I want to insist that it is not interchangeable with personification because of its association with voice and rhetorical technique. See Paxson; Riffaterre, "Prosopopoeia," *Yale French Studies* 69 (1985): 107–23; and Blair, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, 3 vols., 5th ed. (London, 1793), esp. 1:417–20.

13. For discussions of antislavery poetry that personates the enslaved, see Kaul, Festa, and Philip Gould, *Barbaric Traffic: Commerce and Antislavery in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Cambridge, 2003).

14. Such use of the first-person speaker contravenes the assumption that it is in fact personal. Kaul describes it as "ventriloquism" (245), which helpfully captures how speaking for is presented as speaking as.

15. Quintilian is very clear about prosopopoeia's oratorical and specifically legal use, and he is a major influence on the figure's association with law as well as drama and poetry in eighteenth-century texts. See *Institutio Oratoria*, trans. H. E. Butler, 4 vols. (Cambridge, 1920), esp. vol. 2, bk. 6, chap. 1 and vol. 3, bk. 9, chap. 2.

16. Paxson notes that *prosopon* was first used to denote a list of characters, rather like a *dramatis personae*, at the beginning of "Greek drama or philosophical dialogue" (12–13).

17. This phrase is used in Anthony Blackwall, *An Introduction to the Classics* (London, 1718), 233; John Holmes, *The Art of Rhetoric Made Easy: Or, the Elements of Oratory* (London, 1739), 55; and John Ward, *A System of Oratory*, 2 vols. (London, 1759), 2:104.

18. See Ephraim Chambers, *Cyclopaedia, or an Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences*, 2 vols. (London, 1728), 2:899. Interestingly, the two examples of prosopopoeia that Chambers gives at the end of the entry concern the speaking dead: they are an epitaph and a prayer to the gods spoken by a corpse.

19. T. Knox, *Hints to Public Speakers, Intended for Young Barristers, Students at Law, and All Others Who May Wish to Improve Their Delivery* (London, 1797), 38.

20. M. Tullius Cicero, *Against Catiline*, in *The Orations of Marcus Tullius Cicero*, trans. C. D. Yonge (London, 1856), Cic. Catil. 1.18; available at Perseus Digital Library, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/>.

21. The strenuous apposition of first-person pronouns and descriptions of suffering clearly emphasizes this: "What are England's rights, I ask, / Me from my delights to sever, / Me to torture, me to task?" (William Cowper, "The Negro's Complaint" [1788] in *The Poems of William Cowper*, ed. John D. Baird and Charles Ryskamp, 3 vols. [Oxford, 1997], 3:13–14, 13, lines 10–12). The rhetorical question about England's rights points up the speaker's lack thereof, and the poem operates by way of questioning England's (and Britons') possessions (of rights, of feeling) as a way of questioning the enslaved speaker's dispossession.

22. Thomas Clarkson, *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade by the British Parliament* [1808], 2 vols. (London, 1968), 2:190.

23. Thomas Day and John Bicknell, *The Dying Negro: A Poetical Epistle, Supposed to be Written by a Black, (Who lately shot himself on board a vessel in the river Thames;) to his intended Wife*, 1st ed. (London, 1773); *The Dying Negro: A Poetical Epistle from a Black, who shot himself on board a vessel in the river Thames, to his intended Wife*, 2nd ed. (London, 1774); and *The Dying Negro: A Poem*, 3rd ed. (London, 1775). All subsequent references are to the third edition unless otherwise noted. The poem's title shifts across the second and third editions: in 1774 it drops the "supposed" and in 1775 it is simply *The Dying Negro, a Poem*. The newspaper report is quoted or mentioned in an advertisement that prefaces each edition. Brychan Carey notes that the report ran in the *Morning Chronicle* and *London Advertiser*, the *General Evening Post*, and *Lloyd's Evening Post* (*British Abolitionism and the Rhetoric of Sensibility: Writing, Sentiment, and Slavery, 1760–1807* [Basingstoke, 2005], 206n10).

24. *Somerset v. Stewart* (1772), also known as the Mansfield Decision, deemed it

illegal to capture persons enslaved under foreign, colonial law, with an aim of returning them to enslavement, while they are present in England. It upheld the use of *habeas corpus* to prevent such detention and forced transportation. It also prohibited the capture and forced transportation of free black persons. For detailed discussions of the case, its consequences, and its relation to *habeas corpus*, see Dana Rabin, "'In a Country of Liberty?': Slavery, Villeinage and the Making of Whiteness in the Somerset Case (1772)," *History Workshop Journal* 72, no. 1 (2011): 5–29; and Paul D. Halliday, *Habeas Corpus: From England to Empire* (Cambridge, 2010).

25. Day and Bicknell, 2.

26. Day and Bicknell, 4.

27. Day and Bicknell, 4. In the first and second editions, the flowers "blush on yonder purple shore" (3). The revision that describes the shore as "hated" intensifies the poem's anti-pastoral sentiment.

28. Day and Bicknell, 4. The "vernal bloom" echoes John Milton's *Lycidas* [1638], which asks that the ground be "purple[d] . . . with vernal flowers" to mourn for his friend Edward King (*The Complete Works of John Milton*, 8 vols., ed. Thomas N. Corns and Gordon Campbell, vol. 3, *The Shorter Poems*, ed. Barbara Kiefer Lewalski and Estelle Haan [Oxford, 2012], 50–57, 55, line 141).

29. Day and Bicknell, 1st ed., 3.

30. Festa remarks that "the continuous present of the 'dying negro' only provisionally suspends recognition that the poem's speaker is already dead" (161).

31. Day and Bicknell, 13, 1. Day and Bicknell revise the opening line from the first edition's "Blest with thy last sad gift—the power to dye" to "Arm'd with thy sad last gift—the power to die" (1), a change in keeping with the expansion of the poem's conclusion.

32. Day and Bicknell, v, 4, 6. The preface is added to the second edition and retained in the third.

33. Day and Bicknell, 6.

34. Day and Bicknell, 6.

35. Day and Bicknell, 22, 23.

36. Fuss, "Corpse Poem," 3.

37. Mary Loffelholz, "Poetry, Slavery, Personification: Maria Lowell's 'Africa,'" *Studies in Romanticism* 38, no. 2 (1999): 171–202, 186. Loffelholz quotes Philip Fisher, *Hard Facts: Setting and Form in the American Novel* (New York, 1987), 99, 98.

38. Loffelholz, 186–87.

39. Festa, 167.

40. One example of this is the introductory text to Cowper's "The Negro's Complaint," entitled "Complaint," in the pamphlet *A Subject for Conversation and Reflection at the Tea Table* (London, 1788[?]). The prose introduction to the poem—which is not written by Cowper—notes that "it may not be displeasing to present the reader, without entering into any minute detail of all the miseries which, by European avarice, cruelty and wickedness, are entailed on the ill-fated and wretched Africans, with a simple and pathetic delineation of what may naturally be supposed to pass, at times, through the mind of the enslaved negro" (n.p.). The avoidance of "minute detail," which, it is implied, might trouble or bore the reader, and might interrupt the "simple and pathetic delineation," presents the poem as an imaginative exercise only loosely based on the actual experiences of the enslaved. It is notable that the introduction remarks on the inability of the enslaved to speak "in such a manner." This makes it impossible to understand the prosopopeia that follows as anything other than a fiction. Given that this pamphlet was one of the main ways in which Cowper's poem was distributed, it offers important context, as noted by Clarkson (190).

41. See Frank Sayers, "The Dying African" [ca. 1789–90], in *Collective Works of the Late Dr. Sayers*, ed. W. Taylor (Norwich, 1823), 293; John Collins, "The Desponding Negro"

[ca. 1792], in *Scriptscrapalogia: or, Collins's Doggerel Dish of All Sorts* (Birmingham, 1804), 122–23; S. S., “The Dying African,” *Gentleman's Magazine* 61 (November 1791): 1046–47; and the anonymous, untitled poem “On his downy pillow lying,” *Gentleman's Magazine* 62 (March 1792): 260. Before being published in the *Collective Works*, Sayers's “The Dying African” was set to music and printed under the title *The Dying Negro: A Song Composed by Thomas Beilby, Organist of Scarbrough: And by him inscribed to Granville Sharpe, Esq. and other Gentlemen of the Committee, formed for promoting an Abolition of the Slave Trade* (London, 1792). Collins's poem was set to music by W. Reeve and printed with the title *The Desponding Negro* (London, 1792). There is no indication of the authorship of the untitled poem; both Richard Gough and Stebbing Shaw signed pieces “S. S.,” though Gough is only recorded as doing so once, in 1787, whereas Shaw does so several times in 1792 and 1794 and once in 1797 and 1802, respectively. See James M. Kuist, *The Nichols File of the Gentleman's Magazine* (Madison, 1982), 320.

42. Sayers, 293.

43. Sayers, 293.

44. Sayers, 293.

45. Sayers, 293.

46. Max Cavitch cautions against a simple association of metrical regularity with conservative or antirevolutionary tendencies, but notes that it might inhibit such tendencies and that, conversely, “metrical iconoclasm” might produce estrangement that is important to “revolutionary imagination” (“Slavery and Its Metrics,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Nineteenth-Century American Poetry*, ed. Kerry Larson [Cambridge, 2011], 94–112, 110).

47. Collins, 123.

48. Collins, 122–23.

49. Collins, 123.

50. Collins, 123.

51. Collins, 123.

52. Collins, 123.

53. Collins, 123.

54. S. S., 1047.

55. S. S., 1047.

56. “On his downy pillow lying” is included in James G. Basker, ed., *Amazing Grace: An Anthology of Poems About Slavery, 1660–1810* (New Haven and London, 2002), 440–41. To the best of my knowledge, it has not been discussed elsewhere.

57. “On his downy pillow lying,” 260.

58. The planter's “conscious fears” suggest not merely self-awareness but also a waking state. The address, which comprises the remainder of the poem, is clearly uttered by a deceased speaker, and is meant to have a strong claim on reality.

59. “On his downy pillow lying,” 260.

60. “On his downy pillow lying,” 260. If the poem ended here, it would end on an eschatological note, referring to the bitter cup Jesus asks God to take from him; however, it goes on to call for revolt.

61. Lamb, xxviii.

62. On the lyric and legal person, see Barbara Johnson, “Anthropomorphism in Lyric and Law,” *Yale Journal of Law and the Humanities* 10, no. 2 (1998): 549–74.

63. See Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* [1651], ed. Edwin Curley (Indianapolis, 1994), ch. 16, 101–5, esp. 101. Hobbes's examples use male pronouns; I follow Hobbes here.

64. “On his downy pillow lying,” 260.

65. Fuss, “Corpse Poem,” 1.

66. Fuss does mention early modern examples of the genre; her claim is not that the corpse poem appears only in the nineteenth century, but that it becomes prevalent then.

67. Fuss, “Corpse Poem,” 1.

68. William Wordsworth, "Essays upon Epitaphs, I" [1810], in *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1974), 2:49–62, 57.

69. Fuss elaborates: "Corpse poems, unlike elegies, strive to reconstitute death, not to compensate for it. The corpse poem is not a substitute for loss but a vehicle for it, not a restitution for loss but a means to achieve it" (*Dying Modern*, 71).

70. The contrast between this poem and more traditional epitaphs would have stood out starkly, given that it was published alongside several epitaphs in the monthly feature, "Select Poetry, Ancient and Modern." Almost every issue of the *Gentleman's Magazine* from the early 1790s is full of elegies and epitaphs, many of them occasional. There has, however, been little attention to the affinities between elegy and antislavery poetry, with the exception of studies of American literature, notably Cavitch, *American Elegy: The Poetry of Mourning from the Puritans to Whitman* (Minneapolis, 2007).

71. Fuss, "Corpse Poem," 3.

72. Fuss, "Corpse Poem," 21.

73. "On his downy pillow lying," 260.

74. Hobbes, 101.

75. Hobbes, 101.

76. Hobbes's discussion has a broader motivation, of course: it is developed as a justification for the person of the state. Though Hobbes's theory of the person is a theory of political representation, which specifies the use of figure within this context, it can be difficult to distinguish what distinguishes political personation, i.e. the making of political persons, from personation as representation more generally.